ANDROID™ NETRUNNER™
THE CARD GAME

KAMPALA ASCENDENT

Atop the rippling crystal of Lake Victoria sits the skeleton of a second beanstalk. Trade and tourism thrive within the fertile crescent as the Sub-Saharan League, a unity of nations in the midst of an economic and cultural renaissance, works tirelessly to construct the new link between the world of dirt and the limitless expanse. Though determination and focus breed peace within the region, those on the edge wish to disrupt the architecture for personal profit and political vendetta.

PLAY, LEARN, AND BUY

I thrust my fist in a Dambe strike, and my arm ruptures us into the server. I learned *that* move from the best cyber daæmaænga in the business.

The Butcher. *Don't ask, 'nother story…*

This run is gonna have to be fast as fritzing cats, though, 'cos it'll get frigging *hard* real quick. *Azmari ET sure as hell ain't gonna like this one.*

Balloons are billowing down from a grey sky, and I laugh as they wake-stream rainbows into Netspace. *No point in not having some fun as usual, though. Right, sister?*

Adroa, rig-god of both good and evil, just revs up Nyanne, my Go-Kat, for maximum speed into the heart of the media Beast. Time now only to catch and release a neon-pink code balloon—etching a panda smile on it before letting go—and we're powering upward.

Or downward? *You know the drill, Kabonesa—stick with the programs,* not *memories of meatspace.* Here, we are full throttle on the road less traveled, a bumpy frigging country lane we've designed to look like a backwater track. We've turned streaming code into clouds, softer in the face than a host of party balloons.

We hug a hard bend, avoiding an ice mine. We're taking the longer way 'round, bypassing the bigger Azmari ice sentries and trigger systems—speed is all we got.

Luckily, I sure as all hells have that in spades. And Adroa has the lead-in, a bead on a Trojan tracker near AZ ET Bull's-Eye, courtesy of an inside job. *As I was saying, the Butcher… sometimes* who *we know counts, too.*

I'm up and swivel punching at pieces of ice erupting from the clouds, frazzing the explosions into bursts of pink, blue, yellow, and red, the magpie mix of colors I love to wear. "Give us some music, Adroa!" I say, roundhouse kicking an ice cube the size of my frigging head.

Now, that move I taught myself.

But the only music is the pulsing of raw data, that like gigantic white noise, threatening to—

No. Focus, Kabonesa Wu. We've got just one shot at this; gotta stay here in the country of Go-Kats and make this count.

Adroa has brought Nyanne to a halt, in front of an impassable wall of…trees?

Gotta be Data Fort Prime. The heart of the Beast.

Time is dying on me.

I crouch and summon my energy into my left fist, reaching forward to grasp at the trees, wrenching them aside in a crashing fizz of derezzed solidity. There is the briefest window of opportunity, and I run forward, careering into the fetid breath of a bending Emela-Ntouka, a killer of elephants.

Adroa has fed me the mythical intel, and fear freezes me.

It's the size of a frigging elephant, but built like a massive lizard with a giant horn and tearing teeth. It sways its huge head, waiting for me to dash around its flanks.

The servers are behind the Beast's massive tail, flickering and crumbling among a sprawling broken patchwork of rubble: an AZ ET camouflage subroutine, surely? The Beast raises itself to both roar and strike, and I run where it least expects: between the legs, with my back achingly exposed to gashing teeth and all the potent poison of an ice sentry.

The ground behind thumps and rumbles as the Emela-Ntouka strikes just behind me, the earth throwing me forward into the jumble-stoned maw of the Azmari EdTech servers. Adroa guides my strike, it is just one line of code I need, but my strike shreds my gloves before I can grasp the code. Adroa flashes the line into memory. I slap on a smiley-faced panda as a substitute. *Got you.*

I turn and head back out of the stone entrance, which is quivering and ready to topple on my head. The Emela-Ntouka has turned too, I see, but this time is keeping its head low. It will not fall for the same trick twice. *How in all frigging hells to get back out?*

Above me, a piercing call from a leather, bat-like bird that is circling, bladed teeth glinting in its long, curved beak: Kamato, the boat breaker, circling in for me, too. I step forward and grasp at the sky, plucking the monster-bird down with a final Laamb move that threatens to both exhaust and finish me.

I jump and clutch at its neck as it flaps by, and we sweep upward, past the roaring carcass breath from the elephant killer's jaws. I pull the neck back, and the bird screams through my ear-phones as we climb up and up above the trees, into the dead sky, where I have punched a hole through, calling us home like a beacon.

* * *

Reality is always a fading fizzle after a run.

I keep my goggles dark, exiting the hidden server from the library and strolling into Kampala University Square. My eclectic buzz of color and style swivels more than a few quizzical glances from fellow students. The Uni cameras are on all of us here, recording and potentially broadcasting my feat. I will show the world *what* I have stolen from Azmari EdTech.

"Activate stolen code, Subliminal," I tell Adroa.

Everyone is now looking intently at their PADs. Under my breath, I cite a neurolinguistic code, to protect myself from the incoming autosuggestion.

There is deathly silence for several seconds—and then, as one, the students chant aloud: "We Have Three Reasons Why—Play, Learn, and Buy."

Frantically, they start to flick through their PADs, searching for something to purchase.

I laugh.

Gotcha, Azmari! *The world now knows the subliminal programming message you hide but ever deny.*

Then it hits me—what about the smiley panda I left on a code balloon?

A joke, and not prison, is my goal here—do I really have state-of-the-art scrubber software?

I open my PAD to look for the latest security software, muttering all the while: "We Have Three Reasons Why—Play, Learn, and Buy."

Credits

Fantasy Flight Games

Expansion Design and Development: Michael Boggs and Damon Stone with Matt Newman and Jeremy Zwirn

Producer: Erik Dahlman

Editing and Proofreading: Jacob Morris

LCG Manager: Mercedes Opheim

Android Story Review: Daniel Lovat Clark, Lukas Litzsinger, and Katrina Ostrander

Expansion Graphic Design: Joseph D. Olson

Graphic Design Manager: Brian Schomburg

Cover Art: Le Vuong

Art Direction: Andy Christensen

Managing Art Director: Melissa Shetler

Fiction: Nick Wood

Fiction Editor: Katrina Ostrander

Quality Assurance Coordinator: Zach Tewalthomas

Senior Project Manager: John Franz-Wichlacz

Senior Manager of Product Development: Chris Gerber

Executive Game Designer: Corey Konieczka

Creative Director: Andrew Navaro

Playtesters: David Withington, Michael Walsh, Luke Myall, Ben Wilson, Donald Bubbins, Jamie Perconti, Benjamin Torell, Alec Nelson, David Weeks, Jeff Lindsay, Michael Norman, Sean Pacer Stringfellow, Travis Yeo, Bob Juranek, John Juranek, Brett Wright, Devin Hutcheson, Greg Agee, Scott Degenkolb, Justin Bos, Halen Bak, Abram Jopp, Chris Mayfield, Jeff Schoenberg, Anthony Nierowiecz, Chris MacLeod, Michel Roy, Asher Stuhlman, Alex Simon, Trevor Stack, Alexis Spicer, Kevin Sylves, Luke Dennis, Elliott Hedman, Jordan Peters, Alec Anderson, Ryan Shaffer, Weston Odom, Eric Phetteplace, John Treviranus, Adam Cabrera, Brian Cronin, Matt Dickoff, Noah Mckee, Andrew Cortez, Ben Dwyer, Eric Zeitler, Matt Eriquez, Paul Freitas, and Derek Dugan

Asmodee North America

Licensing Coordinator: Sherry Anisi

Licensing Manager: Simone Elliott

Production Management: Jason Beaudoin and Megan Duehn

Publisher: Christian T. Petersen

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